

BIBLICAL PAGES

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**Jesus,
a man of His time and space,
shows us our true and full humanity**

Lectio n° 5 The meaning of a crushed reed

With the last four Lectios we hope to learn from Jesus' humanity how to put into practice His very meekness, the meekness appreciated by the Father, an ethos opening us up to the heritage of the Promise, to the Land, as the symbol of the arrival after a long path, of the abundance of God's blessings, of rest. The arrival after a long path for the poor ('anawim'), for those who confide solely in the Lord, is the fruit of an ethos nourished by prayer: trust and prayer define, according to the Bible, the 'prays', the meek, the one who receives as a gift a new way of dwelling in the world and before God. Meekness and prayer... a different form of power and determination arriving from God thanks to the relation with Him.

How does the meek man behave? What does he think? What does he value in life? Jesus, the Meek Man par excellence, can really show us that blessed path of the poor, a path leading to the Father, leading us to love in the same way as God loves each and every creature, a love that does not coerce but...

A love that does not coerce, a love that is capable of waiting for, and of leaving the door open to a possible opportunity for re-growth. Meekness to be repressed, or to leave room within oneself to the other, as well as to the creative thinking of the Other? Love that exceeds its boundaries to give a renewed hope to man's limits. Wouldn't it be pointless a crushed reed that should have been a straight support instead? Wouldn't it be pointless a little light that instead of lighting were faltering and producing smoke? No, in front of the meek all that wouldn't be pointless...

This is a new hope expected from the beginning of time, proclaimed by the prophet, fulfilled only thanks to him who, like Jesus, is proclaimed 'Beloved' by the Father. The Meek Servant can say: "I am here, so that you may live."

Let us invoke the Holy Spirit

Come, Holy Spirit,

Come and overcome all fear in us,

Make us happy to believe, hope and love.

Fill our lives with enthusiasm, meekness and serenity in our hearts.
Make us love the Scriptures
So that we may recognize Jesus' live voice;
Make us humble and simple of heart
So that we may understand the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.
Come, Holy Spirit!

1. Lectio **(to read the Word / to listen to it)**

Matthew 12:15-21

15 Jesus knew this and withdrew from the district. Many followed Him and He cured them all 16 but warned them not to make Him known. 17 This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

*18 Look! My servant whom I have chosen,
my beloved, in whom my soul delights,
I will send my Spirit upon Him,
and He will present judgement to the nations;
19 He will not brawl or cry out,
His voice is not heard in the streets,
20 He will not break the crushed reed,
or snuff the faltering wick,
21 until He has made His judgement victorious;
in Him the nations will put their hope.*

Let us approach the text...

This is the second part of St Matthew's Gospel (4:17-16:20), Section II (11:2-16:20). This section in particular opens with the Baptist's question on Jesus' identity, after hearing about His deeds. St John is looking for a confirmation, while the generation who can see Him and hear His words disdains – like children in a game – both St John the Baptist's austerity and Jesus' conviviality.

In the texts leading to the one we are dealing with here, everything shows that Jesus' deeds are not recognized, and that the Father is hidden to the learned and the clever, but is revealed by Him to the little ones.

How does Jesus respond to manifest incomprehension? In 11:20 He reproaches the unbelief of the lake-towns; in 11:25 He blesses the Father for His gentle way of revealing Himself; in 11:28 He invites everybody to learn from Him, who is "gentle and humble in heart".

It is this thin thread – after the Pharisees objection to Jesus' understanding of the Sabbath Day, and their subsequent plot to destroy Him – leading us to place the present lines (15-21) among the Messiah's teachings about His own deeds and, in particular, about the way and style Jesus acts in order to reveal God the Father's heart.

Let us divide the text into its parts:

- a) Withdrawing Mt 12:15
- b) Healing for everybody Mt 12:16
- c) Prophecy Mt 12:17-18
- d) Hope Mt 12:19-21

a) Withdrawing

15 Jesus knew this and withdrew from the district. Many followed Him and He cured them all

When Jesus learns that they are plotting to destroy Him, He withdraws from the district. The Greek text makes use of the term “withdrew”. They have condemned Him to death. Jesus does not fight, He does not contend with evil, He just withdraws.

In St Matthew’s Gospel there are two other occurrences of Jesus’ withdrawal: 4:12 and 14:13, as a consequence respectively of learning the news of St John’s arrest and death. In those moments, through the rejection of the prophet Forerunner and through his fate – being arrested and killed – Jesus’ rejection too can be foreseen. Nothing is pointless in the gospel: withdrawing is not equal to fleeing. In 4:12, St Matthew relates that Jesus withdrew to Galilee, in order “to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah”, that is, that the lands of Zebulon and Naphtali could see the promised light of the Messiah.

Mt 12:15 is no exception. It is related to one of Isaiah’s prophecies, and withdrawing is conducive to the fulfilment of a bigger plan.

b) Healing for everybody

16 but warned them not to make Him known.

After “curing them all” – all those who had followed Him – He “warned them not to make Him known”, ‘faneron’. In fact, withdrawing is not just consequent to the choice of not fighting, of renouncing to manifesting His power, of withdrawing from fame and appraisal, but also to the choice of making everybody who followed Him come back to health, spiritual as well as material.

Withdrawing is not a flight then, and He does not withdraw because He is humble, but He withdraws in order to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet.

Here we are invited to regard Jesus not according to moralistic principles, but according to the principle of revelation. He reveals what should come to the fore from His “image” dwelling in us, in the same way as St Matthew tells us that His way of being fulfilled the words of the prophet Isaiah, of the ‘nabi’ speaking in God’s name. But what is God proclaiming through the prophet’s words?

c) Prophecy

17 This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

*18 Look! My servant whom I have chosen,
my beloved, in whom my soul delights,
I will send my Spirit upon Him,*

and He will present judgement to the nations;

St Matthew quotes Isaiah 42:1-4: the voice of the Lord, proclaiming the election of the One who is His beloved, in whom His soul delights. We could interpret this prophecy as describing the path of the poor, of those who put their trust in God, and who do not put their trust in violence and power, but who rather use different criteria of discernment.

Very often St Matthew makes use of the phrase “This was to fulfil...” We cannot just interpret that phrase simplistically as referring to the fulfilment of Old Testament texts in the New.

In fact, St Matthew means that God’s action for His people is constant, and that He is leading His Son’s steps exactly as He has ever guided Israel, being faithful to His love plan.

According to the Jews, Isaiah’s Song 42 with its “Servant of Yahweh” refers to Israel itself (Is 41:8 defines it “Israel, my servant”). However, ‘Israel’ may refer to the whole people of Israel, or to a definite person, or to a person in whom the fate of the people is fulfilled.

St Matthew would like to tell us that the true Servant of the Lord – Jesus – is here. Finally God can recognize Himself thoroughly in a man. The Servant (‘pais’) is the chosen one (‘eretisa’, from ‘hairtizo’, ‘to take for oneself’), the Beloved in whom the Lord’s soul delights. These last two features appear identically at both Jesus’ Baptism and His Transfiguration, two events in which are respectively highlighted the descent of the Holy Spirit and the invitation to the disciples to listen to the Beloved: Israel’s ‘Shemà’ is summarized in a concrete person, the Beloved, who is the object of the Father’s ‘eudochia’, of His pleasure.

And the Father puts His Spirit upon Him.

This is a resonance of the event of Baptism but at the same time also a matter of fact: on the One who has been chosen, whom God reserves for Himself, the Spirit of the Lord rests as a seal of pleasure, of delight, of self-recognition in the Beloved. to be the Beloved shows therefore, in the same Spirit, a very strict correspondence, a unity, a unique relationship.

In particular, the Baptism passage from St Luke’s Gospel places that strong relationship within the context of Jesus’ prayer: while He is praying the Spirit comes down and the Father’s voice proclaims that He is the “Beloved”. It is just because of this utter union that the Servant, the Beloved, may “present judgement to the nations”, given that it has been entrusted to Him.

What is that “judgement”? From the Greek text we infer that the passage could be rendered as “He will proclaim judgement to the Gentiles”. The Gentiles, ‘Etnesin’, were the nations, the people that Israel regarded as heathen. The Servant (the One who is one with the Lord’s will and deeds) proclaims judgement (‘krisis’, from ‘krino’, ‘to separate, to discern’) to all those. We understand then that His choice, His decision, His judgement, are equal to ‘discernment’.

d) Hope

19 He will not brawl or cry out,

*His voice is not heard in the streets,
20 He will not break the crushed reed,
or snuff the faltering wick,
21 until He has made His judgement victorious;
in Him the nations will put their hope.*

Here we are shown how the servant should be and act... Lines 16-17 are in harmony with this passage, which is at the same time a proclamation and a criterion of discernment for the nations.

“He will not brawl”, from ‘erizò’, ‘to come into conflict’: this is pleasing to the Lord... “He will not cry out, His voice is not heard in the streets...” He will not focus attention on Himself in order to win a dispute. This is a choice, a discernment that needs a super-strength, a steadfastness anchored to a strong relationship with the Spirit. It is in fact the very Spirit of the Lord that lives within His deeds and makes of Him a ‘living proclamation’, revealing the Lord, and thus, a servant.

Where is then the Lord of the Old Testament disputing with His people?

Yes indeed, in the Old Testament God disputes with His people. In some of the Psalms, in the prophets, He disputes with unfaithful Israel. We have to say then that discernment and argument go hand in hand. As far as God is concerned, there is an alternative dispute, called ‘rib’, ‘bilateral dispute’, which is opposed to the ‘mispat’, or ‘tribunal judgment’, having as its aim the condemnation of the guilty one. The rib, on the contrary, has as its aim the salvation of the guilty one. But that may take place only between relatives.

From a Biblical point of view, the rib takes place within the Covenant, where the two parties are united in pursuing a common good. It is an alternative way, because love and promotion of the other should emerge from the dispute. It is a need to live in faithful love, and to rekindle its fire when it is smouldering. This is the ‘family dispute’ between God and His people.

“He will not brawl” must be understood then in the context of the plot against Jesus of Mt 12:14: He renounces to come into conflict according to the ‘mispat’, where to defend oneself and to win necessarily implies the condemnation of the other party. He makes His will known to remain in the ‘rib’, in the context of a close love relation with man, even though He is the accuser... But His words are aimed at making the other party repent, be moved, so that he may admit being guilty and re-establish the relation. But when does that happen?

In His lament over the lake-towns (11:20) Jesus is making use of the ‘rib’. But He withdraws in order not to come into conflict according to the law, given that He has already been condemned to death. Should His word, the definitive word on God’s part, be uttered as a defence, it would make Him win and the other party would be condemned.

This implies a great strength, a lack of revenge. The Servant’s meekness must be based upon the very strong will of the Lord to get back what was lost: of course, the reed is different from what it should be; the wick too; and man too, because he is betraying love. In this passage then, meekness is an act of love, trying – after

highlighting truth (12:14) – not to deliver to condemnation what is broken, what is faltering, what has betrayed the love relation.

The Servant, the Beloved who loves exactly as the Lord loves, in the communion of the Holy Spirit, acts to make the other live, re-live: He must act so until the judgement-discernment has triumphed. His aim is to fulfil the ‘rib’, that is, to re-establish the relation of the Covenant, shattered love, instead of fulfilling the ‘mispat’, that is, condemnation. This dynamism will be fulfilled completely at His Passion. There Jesus will be judged in two tribunals: the Sanhedrin and Pilate’s. He will affirm His identity in all truth, but He will keep silent when confronted with fake witnesses. He will renounce to defend Himself in the ‘mispat’ where, according to the law, if He proved that the witnesses were fake, they would be condemned to His very punishment. He keeps silent, because He wants to save man at all costs.

Jesus’ withdrawal, His not brawling, not crying out, not breaking, not snuffing, fulfil a great hope... and not only Israel’s hope. The people, the nations, will hope in this Servant. In Jesus, the ‘servant’ is not just an individual representing Israel, but the Man-God, helping each and every man by His being in the flesh, fulfilling that family relationship between God and man which is the base of the ‘rib’; and bringing back to fullness the love-bond, as well as salvation: good for all, shown by His healing everybody (cf 12:15b).

2. Meditatio

(to meditate on the Word / to let it resound)

Please re-read numbers 2 and 7 of our Rule of Life. This time I present a man of our times whose meekness comes to the fore in his support to and accompaniment of all those who, “crushed” or “faltering”, have been condemned with no appeal by the tribunals.

Dale Recinella, ex Wall Street banker, now lay chaplain in the prison wing of those sentenced to death, is the witness of a strength that has been given to him as a gift, increased by his openness to the Holy Spirit. He is capable of a mercy which, while not being able to prevent the condemned man’s death, perseveres in fighting for the condemned men to be reached by a ray of compassion, and so that he may get back his humanity and walk towards the Lord.

Dale Recinella’s witness

He challenges all those who stand for death penalty:

“Come with me and visit prisoners. Not because all those whom you will encounter are innocent but because the people you will encounter are fully human. When we stop imagining them as monsters and we encounter people with a name and a face, we realize that they are human beings, that

they are similar to us even though they may have made mistakes worse than ours, and that in them there is a humanity we must respect.”

The first approach is not always easy. Dale relates:

“One of the first prisoners I approached in the death wing was an Afro-American man full of anger, who had grown up in the Southern work camps for immigrants. He had experienced in his life every kind of violence and abuses. When I approached him, he cursed me and said that we white men were guilty of destining him from his birth to the death wing. I had no answer for his anger. I prayed the Holy Spirit that He may give me the right words and bit by bit he slowly opened up to dialogue. After a few years, he asked me if we could pray together at the beginning of our meetings. He became a new man. He became known in his wing as a man of peace capable of guiding other men full of anger, and especially black men, to overcome their feelings of grudge and violence. When the execution warrant was issued, he asked that I could be his spiritual adviser. That came as a shock for all those who were convinced that his crime had been motivated by racial hate. In his last few hours of life, standing at less than ten metres from the electric chair on which he would be executed, he read to the policemen and me St Francis’ peace prayer and Canticle of Creatures. Thus, even where there seems to be no room for hope, God may enter man’s heart. As it happened to another prisoner sentenced to death who, deeply moved by Pope John Paul II, wished that he could become a Catholic. Unfortunately, when he had been preparing for it for a year, the execution warrant was issued, just a few days after the death of the pontiff. However, the day before the execution, the bishop came to the death wing to administer confession, communion and chrismation to him. The ceremony was held in the death wing, with his hands and feet bound. When the bishop chrismated him, his whole body bounced back as if he had been electrocuted. The guards were astonished. He died in peace, feeling himself one with God, and he was explicitly pardoned by his victim’s family.”

The cases of radical transformation Dale Recinella can be a witness to are very many. Nothing that man can say, build, or do can prevent the Holy Spirit from entering and dwelling in a human heart, welcoming Him...

3. Oratio

(to pray the Word / to repeat it)

Lord Jesus, please make of me a meek human being.
Let my feet never rest out of laziness or complaints,
But may they learn to run in order to proclaim Your love and to give away
friendship.
May my hands never be fists as a sign of anger,
But may they open and get dirty while serving other men,
May they be generous when giving and joined to pray.
Do not let my eyes gaze with hate or vengeance

But may they be able to be moved and cry for the sufferance of the world.
Make my ears dumb to the words of judgement and condemnation
But may they be opened and may they listen to the Word of God and the needs of
my brothers and sisters.
Do not let my lips utter words that may wound others but words encouraging and
supporting all those that live around me.
Do not let my heart be hardened, incapable of welcoming and forgiving others,
but may it be enlarged to contain everybody and bless the whole world.

4. Contemplatio **(to contemplate the Word / silence)**

Let us pray silently in order to leave room for the Holy Spirit and be transformed
by Him.

5. Collatio **(to share the Word)**

Let us share our own experience of the Word.